

Best Practices: Using Criteria Formatively

1. **"Unpack" evaluation guides or criteria**. It's OK to develop rubrics or sets of criteria as "shorthand" for the underlying features you expect to see in successful performances. But students may not know what the terms mean or what they look like in a paper. "The strong paper is characterized by a high degree of reflection" may mean nothing to students who don't know what "reflection" is and what you mean by it. Write out explanations of the shorthand criteria as fuller descriptions and give them to students before they begin a paper.

2. **Use sample papers**. As a courtesy, send around permission forms in which students agree to let you use their writing anonymously in future courses. Then save copies of the papers and use them the next time you teach. In the subsequent course, give students "interestingly problematic" papers from the previous class and as homework, ask them to analyze the papers, using your criteria. (Avoid wonderful and terrible papers.) In class, collect students' impressions of the paper(s), or put them into small groups to see if they can reach consensus. This helps them to instantiate your criteria in the context of actual papers.

3. **Create annotated models**. Follow the process in (2) for collecting samples of students' writing. Then annotate one or two samples, showing how you would apply the evaluation criteria to them. The simplest way is to write or insert comments on the samples, then scan or save them to PDF and post or distribute them. More sophisticated methods involve highlighting words or passages so that when students scroll over them, a window opens containing your annotations. Or create hyperlinks from the criteria to examples in the text.

4. **Create criteria with the class.** Without showing any criteria, give students interestingly problematic sample papers based on your assignment, following the process in (2). Ask them to critique the papers for homework, based on the goals of the assignment. When they come to class, put them into small groups to compare and refine their criteria. For each issue in their critique, they must derive a more general principle or standard for a "successful paper." If they find that a sample paper doesn't have a clear controlling idea, then their group could offer the criterion that a good paper "will give a clear sense of the main or controlling idea somewhere in the introduction." Negotiate these with the class as the groups report, writing all their criteria on the board. Take a picture of the board with your cell phone. At home, reorganize, revise, and edit the criteria as needed, adding any important criteria the students didn't articulate. Then give the final criteria back to the students and use them when you grade their work and when they engage in peer conferences. For more details and examples, see Anson, C. M., Davis, M., & Vilhotti, D. (2011). "What do *we* want in this paper?": Generating criteria collectively." In J. Harris, J. Miles, & C. Paine (Eds.), *Teaching with student texts* (pp. 35-45). Logan: Utah State University Press.

5. **Show how goals are linked to criteria**. In class, help students to see how specific learning goals are tied to your expectations for their work. What does it look like when a specific learning goal has been met in a paper?

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